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ABSTRACT

The history of an urban squatter settlement in Bogota, Colombia, and the author's experiences with its residents in the last ten years are summarized. Topics covered include the unfriendly relationship between the government and squatter settlements; the history of the relationship between the government and this particular barrio; the demography of the settlement where the author lives; the myth that residents of such communities are only marginally involved in the larger society; the social, religious, and political organization of this barrio; community activism by its residents; and the author's personal experiences as he became involved in the settlement both as a priest and as a community member. A list of research papers of the Project on Human Potential concludes the paper. (IS)

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Tagging Along with the Urban Poor in Colombia 1973-1983

Carlos E. Vasco

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TAGGING ALONG WITH THE URBAN POOR IN COLOMBIA 1973-1983

A Contribution to the Chapala Workshop 1983.

By CARLOS E. VASCO, Bogotá, Colombia.

1. Introduction.

This manuscript is not a paper: it is just a brief summary of a few possible chapters of a non-existing book, which has a high probability of never being actually written. In case it does appear, it will deal with ten years of work in an urban slum region in the Northeastern hills of Bogotá, Colombia. This summary is intended only as an opening up of specific areas that might lead to deepening conversations with, and critical questioning from other Workshop participants.

2. Brief description of the slum area.

The Colombian capital, Bogotá, now close to 4.000.000 inhabitants, lies in the Southeastern corner of a high plateau 8000 ft. (2600 m.) above sea level. A row of steep hills borders the Eastern flank of the city. The urban poor have been forced up the hills in order to remain close to the downtown area. The National Park divides very sharply the most populated Southeastern region from the thinly populated Northeastern region of the hills, where ten slums spread over a two-mile strip from 40th to 72nd Street, due East of 5th Avenue ("Carrera 5a"), the Easternmost through street from Downtown to the North Side of the city where most of the rich families now live.

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To speed up traffic going North-South and back, city planners have been trying to drive a highway along the hills since 1962. Colombian white-collar workers and executives insist in going back home for lunch, which is rather a heavy dinner at noon. This odd time- and fuel-consuming custom makes the Eastern highway most desirable. The Military support the highway construction on strategic grounds: they would have a closed belt of highways around the city to shield the main part of the city from rioting mobs coming from the slums, as it happened in 1948, and any riot zone would be quickly approached from two sides. Realtors and former owners of the hills wish to develop that property for apartment buildings for the upper-middle class, counting on the beautiful view of the city from the hills as their most valuable assets.

Property deeds and titles are obscure or ill-defined, and most of the land has been long settled by squatters. Legally speaking, they would acquire the right to own the land after 20 years, but the legal proceedings are so complicated and expensive, that they are practically beyond their reach. The heirs of the former owners are now actively spending money in bribes and attorneys' fees, as they see increasing chances of recovering some of the land through the evictions brought by the land-clearing operations through the slums.

After the failure of the 1962 highway project, the city administration tried again in 1972. People in the slums quickly

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organized themselves into Community Defense Committees, fought back and stalled the project. I started working in the second semester of 1973 in one of the slums of the Northeastern hills, "Barrio Sucre", just a few blocks from the Jesuit University where I then lived.

The election campaign of 1974, where the Conservative government in power lost to the Liberal Alfonso López, was adroitly used by the defense committees to pit the Liberal candidate against the the Conservative Mayor of the city; when López won the election with heavy support from the hill dwellers, he ordered the newly elected Aldermen of his Party to vote down the highway project.

I moved into the Barrio in January of 1975, thinking we would have relative calm. But the expectations created by the highway project in former owners and property dealers were too high. A mass eviction was threatening a neighboring slum, "Bosque Calderón", and in the very same month of January I was again fully involved in the struggle. That eviction (and seven more tries) was stopped by a combination of legal, social, political and organizational measures, and after eight years "Bosque Calderón" still stays at 53rd Street as before.

There was a change of government in 1978, and the new administration tried again a refurbished version of the highway project. It succeeded in the Southeastern hills, but not in the Northeastern. Bulldozers had to be stopped by sit-ins and makeshift fences. The project changed again in 1981, and a new lay-out for the highway was drawn. Earth-moving started and the pressure mounted. Most of the Northeastern part of the highway is now under way.

But construction stops at 43rd Street, where "Barrio Sucre" begins, and does not start again until 53rd Street, where "Bosque Calderón" ends. The administration is committed to finish the highway this year, and it probably will. But we are still there, and we demand recognition and indemnity for those evicted by the highway. If we meet again next year, "Barrio Sucre" and "Bosque Calderón" might no longer exist.

3. Preparing to move in.

"Barrio Sucre" had only about 80 families, some 500 people, in 1973. "Bosque Calderón" only 12 families, some 70 people. "Barrio San Martín", up-hill from "Barrio Sucre" was very similar to it, and so was "Barrio Pardo Rubio", to the North; "Barrio El Paraíso", the first one of the Northeastern hills, just South of"Barrio Sucre" was (and is) a much larger and populated slum; the lower part of the Barrio had gained recognition from the city government, and were very proud of it. The other Barrios did not appear in the maps and could not apply for public utilities. They were declared illegal, "pirate-slums" ("Barrios piratas"), and dismissed by city officials. They would be quickly erradicated by the highway. That was the situation in 1973, when a Swiss priest, who had come as a missionary along with a group of nurses belonging to a religious community, asked me to substitute for him in the Sunday services while he took a vacation in his home Country.

I talked to the priest, to the nurses, to the school teacher and to some of the people that lived in the Barrio. I found it most difficult to communicate with the slum dwellers, and it

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seemed to me very odd to arrive there on Sundays (as a Parachute jumper) to perform rituals whose meaning for the people I could not fathom. With a group of other priests and seminarians, we decided to take up a crash training in anthropological methods. We found a most interesting method for approaching a lower-class community, developed by Dr. Manuel Zavala along the ideas of Paulo Freire, and went through the steps of his method.

Painstaking observation, ascetic restraint, careful writing of field-diaries, discussions and summaries, maps and charts, prepared us for the type of work we wanted to do: non-paternalistic, liberating, respectful accompanying of endogenously generated processes in the slum communities. It is hard to assess whether we succeeded or not: there were no preset criteria for "success".

4. The myth of marginality.

The sociological and anthropological literature on slum communities of the sixties was centered on the dual-society schema and the concept of marginality. "Los marginados" was the new name of the urban poor, and the theoretical constructs tried to characterize the traits of marginality and the ways to overcome them on the road to "modernization". The failure of the "Decade of Development" and the Alliance for Progress 1960-1970 brought about new theoretical developments. The dependency schema, structuralism, marxism and dialectical thinking spread fast in the early seventies even in circles where empirical and functional sociology and descriptive anthropology had thrived unchallenged. We were caught in the middle of the debate, and went with fresh

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eyes to contrast the competing theories with the real slum just across the street from my comfortable home at the Jesuit Community Residence of the Pontifical University of Bogotá, "Universidad Javeriana".

We did find the external traits of "marginality", but we found also that the slum economy was tightly interwoven with the formal economy of the city; that the slum dwellers formed a sort of reserve army of chronically unemployed, extremely important for the handling of capital-labor tensions; that the type of work and informal enterprises found in the slums provide a significant cheapening of subsistence expenses, raw materials and half-processed goods. We saw and heard the politicians visiting the slums, the street vendors selling their wares, the police officers coming and going, and found such a thick net of relationships with the "modern" sector, that the myth of marginality evaporated to a mere cloud in the background.

5. Community Action.

After the fall of the Dictatorship of General Rojas Pinilla in 1957, the civil government inaugurated in August of 1958 tried to reconstruct grass-roots organizations and to encourage community participation. An organization called "Community Action" ("Acción Comunal") started spreading in urban and rural communities: Community Action Groups had to form in every subdivision of the cities or counties that wished to apply for state aid, for public utilities, schools, health centers or similar services.

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The "Juntas Comunales" formed at a very fast rate throughout the Country. In upper-class and middle-class suburbs they are purely nominal and come into action only for street repairs, park maintenance and security problems: an application from the "Junta" has far better chances of success than a query from an individual. In the lower-class neighborhoods the "Junta" is a very powerful organization: the idea caught up very well with traditional leadership and cooperative work patterns, and the "Junta" can control public services, solve problems, decide minor legal problems and exert a great deal of pressure over uncooperative individuals. It greatly diminishes the cost of public utilities and services, as the "Junta" can organize Sunday work groups to install sewage pipes, electricity cables, repair the school building and other chores that the Department of Public Works would have to perform (as they usually do for the suburbs).

In the ten slums of the Northeastern hills of Bogotá the "Juntas" are all-powerful. The President of the "Junta" is the undisputed authority in the Barrio. It is an elective office, fully "ad-honorem" and time-consuming. Elections used to be every year; since 1981 they are held every other year. In theory, the "Junta" officials should rotate at most every two years; in practice, the person that gets to be President stays in power for a long time, or alternates with a friend or relative when the City delegate pushes hard the no-re-election rule.

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The incumbent President is most able to detect potential leadership: a possible rival is easily detected and neutralized through diverse and powerful techniques, from public taunting to private gossip. Connections with city officials or politicians are carefully cultivated and effectively shielded from other members of the community, to keep access channels as a private and valuable property: they mean power. Politicians know this, and cultivate in their turn the "Junta" Presidents, to have an audience and a few votes every two years. The interplay between "Juntas" and political parties is a complex research topic, with great implications for electoral patterns, distribution of public funds, public work projects, and, of course, corruption cases.

6. Fostering alternative forms of leadership.

We went into the Barrios with full agreement and co-operation from the "Juntas"; an open break-up with the "Junta" in "Barrio Pardo Rubio" forced one of the three priests out of that slum, and hampered the work of the rest of the group to achieve a unified organization of the five closest Barrios where the work concentrated: El Paraíso, Sucre, San Martín, Pardo Rubio and Bosque Calderón. To this day the rift with "Pardo Rubio" is still open and causes endless difficulties in dealing with the authorities, providing public services and dealing with non-profit organizations that offer some type of help to the slums.

While cultivating good relations with the other "Juntas", it was soon clear to the group that the iron grip of the "Junta"

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would extinguish any new initiatives and suffocate any new leaders-to-be. We decided to try parallel organizations: the Defense Committees, a Health Committee and several youth groups. The "Juntas" got the message very fast and fought back with two strategies: first, they tried to incorporate the new organizations into the "Junta" as "ad-hoc" Committees under their control; second, if that failed, they tried to discredit the Committees with the community, with the authorities, with the priests. They applied pressure on women through their husbands, to young people through their parents, to force them to resign from the organizations. A great deal of patience, of starting and re-starting, of open and private support, began to yield some fruits: the Health Committee won a legal battle to obtain a separate charter, different from the "Junta"'s, and is now thriving; the Defense Committee survives, and four youth groups are now active. Through those organizations a new generation of young leaders is emerging, and women find a way to co-operate and lead in alternative forms of organization, different from the one time all-absorbing "Junta Comunal".

7. Family patterns.

After ten years of work one still gets surprised quite often at the discovery of still one more hidden family relationship: a person turns out to be somebody else's child than the one you thought was his father; blood or in-law relationships through third persons suddenly appear; people you knew for years turn out to be half-brothers or sisters. Moreover, the very close and

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strong "God-relatives" form a thick net of relationships that knit together all five Barrios mentioned above (and many others). The God-parents take care of their God-children with great interest and love, help with their expenses (clothing, health, education), and adopt them (without legal procedure) if their parents die or abandon them. The real parents and the God-parents feel very close to each other and form a new relationship: they are "compadres" ("co-parents"). They address each other as "compadre" or "comadre", and always refer to each other in that fashion when talking to other people. I have found the "compadre" relationship stronger than the brother (or sister) relationship; it is usually more important to convince a co-parent to talk to his co-parent about some problem, than it is to convince even the father or mother of the same person; advice coming from a co-parent is more valued than from blood-relatives.

This "extended family" or "molecular family" is the best type of social security for the slum inhabitants, and usually it is the only one they have. Economists find no explanation to the survival of families with uncertain incomes around the $100-a-month level or with long cycles of unemployment. I have found the extended family to be the cushion that provides the key to the riddle: they take care of other relatives' children, find sporadic work for them, give them chores to do in exchange for some money or food, spread out a wide information network to find job openings and get "recommendations", the only way to get those jobs when they actually exist. There is no unemplyment compensation or insurance; the social security coverage is just about 17%; as long as these conditions prevail, the extended family is a must.

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B. Religion as the opiate of the people.

It is true that traditional Catholicism has been used and abused to control public and private protest, to hide social tensions and to bog down one side of the class struggle. But what traditional Marxism forgets is that the word "opiate" has also a positive meaning: any traditional medicine that is used to soothe and calm. In the dire conditions of the slum dwellers, in the hardship of their working days, in the repressive conditions of the Latin-American states, one needs a good dose of traditional soothing medicine to be able to see where to go, to keep one's head clear and to get the energy to start doing something about a future change. If the driver has a piercing headache, it would be suicidal to refuse an analgesic for the long ride ahead.

The behavior of the Christian basis communities in Brazil, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and now here and there in Colombia, has shown how far from "alienating" a deep understanding of the Gospel of Jesus of Nazareth can be. When the para-military armed bands kill the cathechists, threaten the priests and burn some editions of the Bible, one begins to wonder.

My training in theology in Germany was far from what one sees and reads about Latin-American Theology, or Liberation Theology. It was rather solid traditional dogmatics and scholarly exegese. Hans Küng was branded as a heretic, and even Karl Rahner was never invited to talk to the seminarians in the staid cloisters of the Hochschule Sankt-Georgen in Frankfurt am Main. The more Liberal professors were more for "Aufklärung" than for "Befreiung". When I came back to Colombia I had a very European view of the

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in a cruel world. I
tasks and problems of theology, and a rather secularized image
the source
of a modern priest's pastoral role. My work as University
professor in Mathematics in an upper-class school like the
Jesuit Pontifical University was an appropriate setting for
that type of theology and that style of pastoral work.

It was the contact with the people in "Barrio Sucre" what changed the wirings. The secularizing trend was out of place in a world of traditional Catholicism with its fascinating blend of folklore and superstition. Existential analysis and hair-splitting distinctions were mere word-plays or obscure sentences in a foreign language. The people in the Barrio were very kind to me; may be the Latin mass was still fresh in their memories and they thought my words were not more but also no less understandable than Latin sentences. The ritual part of religion was sufficient for them, and the Sunday mass is an entrenched moral obligation for women and children of the lower classes. (Men attend only during the Holy Week or the services for the dead). It was very difficult to get any feed-back from them. Anything I said was deemed "very interesting" and "very beautiful". Any criticism of the priest was taboo. Gradually some hints filtered through their polite admiration. I felt out of place, and started thinking and studying; popular religion, everyday language, anthropology, cognitive psychology, semiotics and other fields of study yielded some information, but its quantity and its validity left many a doubt. I still do not know how much I understand their religious world and how much they manage to understand from mine. All I know is I have learned more in these ten years from them than I learned in theology.

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Religion is a way of surviving in a cruel world. It is the source of consolation in sorrow, and the source of personal dignity, of a feeling of equality before God and a sense of being somehow important for somebody. Woman and children find in confession or in a talk with a priest one of the few instances where they are listened to, and where their problems are taken to be real problems, problems of life and death, problems of heaven and hell, problems before God. Women talk in the homily after the Gospel, and people listen to them; they find deep veins of gold in worn-out sentences of the Bible; they find down-to-earth resonances of abstract sayings, and surprise the priest with their free associations. Popular culture surfaces and flowers in a conversational homily. It happens.

For the purposes of comparison, I should mention a good try I made to get some help from the University Psychology Clinic. Some young girls of my Barrio were in deep trouble. Their mothers asked for help; the girls hinted in their own way they needed it. I talked to the Director of the Clinic and got some appointments for the girls to talk to the practising Psychologists in their last year of studies. The Psychologists found no trouble whatsoever. I insited. New appointments. Still not a hint of any problems. The Director talked to me, and I suggested some of the professors could talk to the girls. The professors assured me that they found no special problems with the girls. The language and culture barrier was hermetic. One of the girls was pregnant. The other had seen her mother beaten by her father in front of her; the father pierced the mother repeatedly with a fork and threatened to kill the girl if she said something.

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The third girl fled from home shortly after with her boyfriend and a few months later had an abortion. But they had no special problems according to the Psychologists of the University Clinic. The sad thing is that I could not help either.

9. Conclusion.

This short summary is now long enough. There are still many topics that might turn out to be very interesting chapters of the non-existing book: the work with University students and young political activists that visit the slums; the contradictions of legal assistance to the people; the patterns of school attendance and repeated "flunking" even in first grade; the type of private, public and mass communications found in the area; the problems of health and the work of the Health Committee. A sociologist, an anthropologist, a psychiatrist, a social worker, a teacher, would have dozens of additional questions to ask. But this non-paper cannot have all the answers. Something must be left for the Chapala Workshop.

Carlos E. Vasco

Bogotá, February of 1983.

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